Getting It Backward on Iraq

F. Gregory Gause III

LET'S MAKE A DEAL

THE LATEST twist in the Clinton administration's Iraq policy is an attempt to ratchet up military and political pressure on Saddam Hussein. The brief but intensive air campaign of December 1998—Operation Desert Fox—was followed by an expansion of the rules of engagement for American and British pilots patrolling the no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq. Iraqi provocations and subsequent allied reprisals against Iraqi military targets now occur almost daily.

The administration has also appointed a special coordinator for Iraq, Frank Ricciardone, to oversee implementation of the Iraq Liberation Act and help coordinate efforts by Iraqi opposition groups to overthrow Saddam. Both Ricciardone and Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Martin Indyk have held public consultations with opposition figures, including representatives of the largest Iraqi Shiite organization, the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SAIRI)—a group the administration had previously avoided because of its close connections to Iran. A serious debate is now underway between those who advocate a greater commitment of American force to topple Saddam and those who argue that containment of Iraq is the only feasible U.S. goal.

This new level of activity and debate, however, has obscured the immediate crisis that U.S. Iraq policy faces. On the ground in Iraq, there is currently no monitoring or inspection of Iraq's capacity to develop and deliver weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The United

F. GREGORY GAUSE III is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Vermont and author of *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States.*

Nations Special Commission for the disarmament of Iraq (UNSCOM) has effectively ceased to function; its inspectors have been withdrawn and its long-term monitoring systems abandoned.

The United States, meanwhile, continues to support crippling economic sanctions on Iraq that have neither weakened Saddam's hold on power nor prevented him from pursuing his WMD programs. They have, however, reduced the Iraqi people to penury. Iraqi society, once relatively prosperous and solidly middle class, is now mired in a daily struggle for survival. Most people live hand to mouth, relying on inadequate rations provided by the U.N. "oil for food" program. Iraq's medical and educational systems, once the envy of the Arab world, are in disarray. The social disintegration brought on by sanctions is not only a tragedy in its own right, but also diminishes the already slim chance that internal Iraqi discontent could be converted into sustained popular rebellion: people consumed with finding their next meal do not have time to overthrow dictators.

The Clinton administration is apparently content to live with the end of international monitoring and inspection and to manage the threat Saddam poses through a combination of the sanctions and the new, more aggressive military posture. They have it backward. The United States should instead formulate a "take it or leave it" proposal for Iraq, involving a substantial revision of the sanctions in exchange for the return of intrusive, on-the-ground inspections designed to keep Iraq's WMD programs under observation and control.

The proposed revision of the sanctions regime should include three elements. The first is a lifting of limits on Iraq's ability to produce and sell oil and to negotiate with international oil companies for exploration and production agreements. The second is a suspension of Iraq's obligation to contribute to the U.N. Gulf War compensation fund—an obligation that currently consumes 30 percent of Iraqi oil revenues—as long as oil prices remain below $18 per barrel. And the third is an end to U.N. supervision of the purchase and distribution of food and medicine in Iraq. Other elements of the current system should remain in place. A small portion of revenue from Iraqi oil sales, for example, should still be earmarked to fund U.N. activities in the country, including a reformulated (and probably renamed) UNSCOM. Iraq should still be prohibited from purchasing military equipment and dual-use technology.

And U.N. Security Council resolutions demanding Iraqi disarmament, particularly in the WMD area, should be reaffirmed.

If accepted, this tradeoff—essentially lifting general economic sanctions in exchange for restoring disarmament operations—would recapture some international support for the U.S. policy of keeping Iraq contained. The proposal is similar in some respects to a French plan floated at the United Nations after Desert Fox, although it calls for more intrusive inspections. It would respond to French and Russian desires to resume commercial relations with Iraq while forcing those countries to reaffirm and put teeth into their opposition to Iraqi WMD development. The plan would also strip Saddam of his most effective propaganda weapon in the Arab world, the contention that the United States seeks to destroy Iraqi society and not simply his regime. The overall impact would be to reduce overt international opposition to the U.S. policy of using military and political pressure against Saddam, if not gain it international support.

American policymakers need to recognize that the only "box" into which sanctions put Iraqis is coffins. The primary responsibility for this tragedy obviously rests on Saddam and his henchmen, who are content to use the Iraqi people's suffering for their own purposes and even deliberately increase it to score propaganda points. But this has little bearing on the practical point, which is that the sweeping sanctions regime now in place does not on balance advance American foreign policy goals. Iraq is contained by the military power of the United States and others, not by economic sanctions. Iraqi WMD programs have continued throughout the 1990s, and sanctions cannot bring them to an end. Instead of contributing to containment, the sanctions have become a rallying point for all who oppose the general thrust of U.S. policy toward Iraq. Ending the indirect American complicity in the suffering that the sanctions cause would therefore be both a moral and a practical move.

ONE OR THE OTHER

ECONOMIC SANCTIONS undoubtedly limit Saddam's ability to develop and obtain weapons of mass destruction. They restrict the amount of money Baghdad can obtain from oil sales and place the disbursement of those funds under U.N. supervision. But the more relevant question

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On the front line: Iraqis wait for food rations, Baghdad, 1999

is not whether the sanctions impede Iraqi WMD plans, but rather to what extent. The evidence gathered by UNSCOM indicates that the answer is "not very much." As of October 1998, UNSCOM could not verify Iraq's contentions that it had destroyed critical components of its missile program, 550 mustard-gas shells, 500 chemical and biological bombs, and substantial amounts of biological and chemical weapons materiel. A good-sized WMD program, that is, still probably exists inside Iraq.

What progress there has been in degrading Iraq's unconventional weapons capabilities, moreover, has come through UNSCOM and not the sanctions. President Clinton has famously and correctly said that UNSCOM destroyed more Iraqi WMD resources than did the Gulf War air campaigns. Since 1991, UNSCOM has demolished 48 Scud missiles, 30 chemical and biological missile warheads, 60 missile launch pads, nearly 40,000 chemical bombs and shells in various stages of production, 690 tons of chemical weapons agent, 3 million tons of chemical weapons precursor materials, and the entire al-Hakam biological weapons production facility. Furthermore, UNSCOM's very presence diverted Iraqi resources from developing more WMD to hiding what they already have. International monitoring and inspections are hardly foolproof means of disarming Iraq. But if the major threat to American interests from Iraq

is WMD development, then it is much better to have UNSCOM (or something like it) without sanctions than sanctions without UNSCOM.

Sanctions have also been unable to achieve their other goal, the removal of Saddam Hussein from power. He has simply passed on the costs of sanctions to his people while continuing to build palaces and coddle the military and police apparatus that maintains his regime. It might have been reasonable in 1990 or even in 1995 to think that sanctions could bring him down, but it is not reasonable to think so now. If anything, UNSCOM presents more of a threat to Saddam's regime than sanctions do. The tangible limitation of Iraqi sovereignty presented by UNSCOM and the no-fly zones, together with the military actions taken to support them, do far more to weaken Saddam in the eyes of his security and intelligence services than do the sanctions. Moreover, although UNSCOM was hardly a CIA front, as some of the more sensational recent reporting has implied, it was indeed one of the few means of gathering intelligence inside Iraq. As with the control of Iraqi WMD programs, if the chief American concern is getting rid of Saddam, then Washington should prefer UNSCOM without sanctions to sanctions without UNSCOM.

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The costs of sanctions, meanwhile, have been vividly described by Denis Halliday, the U.N. official who coordinated the "oil for food" program in Baghdad before resigning in protest in August 1998. Halliday contends that the program "remains a largely ineffective response to the humanitarian crisis in the country and has not begun to tackle the underlying infrastructural causes of continuing child mortality and malnutrition." He attributes the death of 500,000 Iraqi children directly to the sanctions. Health services are unable to handle the most basic preventable diseases, like polio and diarrhea, or curtail their spread to epidemic proportions. Thousands of teachers in the Iraqi primary and secondary education systems have simply left their posts, and student dropout rates have reached 30 percent, in a country previously famous in the Arab world for the quality of its education. All this has led to the breakdown of the Iraqi family structure, with high levels of divorce and a growth in single-parent families and prostitution. It is common now to

see children begging on the street, an unimaginable sight in Iraq before the 1990s.

The United States and other international actors had the best intentions in building humanitarian exceptions into the original sanctions regime and devising the "oil for food" program. And Saddam certainly bears primary responsibility for the suffering of the Iraqi people. His regime refused to accept "oil for food" aid until 1996, has obstructed its implementation since then, and has refused to disarm as required by the post–Gulf War U.N. Security Council resolutions that established the sanctions in the first place.

But acknowledging Saddam's guilt does not mean exculpating the United States and the rest of the international community, because the hardships in Iraq are predictable and would not be occurring without the sanctions. It is morally obtuse to dismiss the issue by saying, as Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright did in May 1998, "the fact that Iraqi children are dying is not the fault of the United States, but of Saddam Hussein.... [I]t is ridiculous for the United States to be blamed for the dictatorial and cruel, barbaric ways that Saddam Hussein treats his people." Even with the February 1998 expansion of the amount of oil Iraq was permitted to sell under "oil for food," after all, the program remains underfunded. The drop in world oil prices last year drastically reduced the revenue available to the program. And since 40 percent of that revenue is set aside—three-quarters for contributions to the U.N. Gulf War compensation fund, one-quarter for the operating expenses of U.N. programs in Iraq—even a perfectly implemented "oil for food" program would not substantially improve the lot of average Iraqis.

The terrible human costs of the sanctions program might be justified if sanctions could be expected to bring down Saddam's regime in the foreseeable future or if they could prevent him from maintaining and expanding his WMD programs. Since they can do neither, it is time to propose trading them away for something else.

A RISKY BUSINESS?

RADICALLY REVISING the sanctions would certainly involve some risks. It would increase the revenues at Saddam's disposal, for example, and essentially lift direct international controls on how he uses them

(although indirect measures such as import controls on military and dual-use technology would continue).

Initially, at least, the overall revenue increase would not be that substantial. With the current "oil for food" limits and low oil prices, Iraq is actually producing as much oil as it physically can. Even if sanctions were lifted there would be little significant rise in Iraqi oil production for some time, until sufficient infrastructural investment had been made and world demand for oil has increased. Nevertheless, suspending payments to the Gulf War compensation fund would allow the Iraqi government to keep an additional 30 percent of revenues from oil sales, and Saddam might be able to increase the resources he now devotes to WMD and other military programs.

Another risk is that modifying the sanctions regime might help solidify and extend Saddam's rule. He would undoubtedly claim the move as a victory, and try to turn it to his own benefit. But it would be a hollow victory for him, as Iraqis and others would see. It would be accompanied by a return to Iraq of UNSCOM or a similar organization. Other limitations on Iraqi sovereignty, such as the no-fly zones, would remain. Although some international businesses might return to Iraq, Saddam's regime would remain a pariah in the eyes of much of the international community. In fact, other Arab and Muslim governments might feel more able to keep Iraq in military and political isolation because they could no longer be accused of supporting an alleged American campaign to starve the Iraqi people.

The extent to which the changes would actually alleviate suffering inside Iraq is difficult to predict, but they would probably help only at the margins. Somewhat more money would come into the country, and the Iraqi regime would no longer be able to shirk responsibility for the care and feeding of its population by blaming foreigners for the country's impoverishment. Saddam would have an incentive to try to show his people that he could, in fact, improve their lives. A slight improvement might even lead to a revolution of rising expectations that would undermine the stranglehold of the present regime.

Lifting the sanctions will not provide enough funds to restore Iraq's infrastructure to its pre-1990 condition, something that would cost many billions of dollars. The United States and other opponents of Saddam's regime should make clear, therefore, that once a responsible

government is in place in Iraq they will help finance such rebuilding. This promise should be made explicitly and at the same time that Washington proposes modifying the sanctions regime. The precondition for redevelopment aid should be simply full compliance with all relevant U.N. resolutions; it is unnecessary to specify Saddam's ouster as a requirement, because he has made it abundantly clear that full compliance is something he cannot, or will not, provide.

The risks of lifting sanctions, however, should be measured against the benefits the proposed deal would bring. First, it would enable the United States to reconstruct the crumbling international consensus surrounding the containment of Iraq. France has already suggested a similar plan, and it should be possible for the United States to negotiate a common proposal with the French along the lines sketched above. The United Kingdom would be supportive, and with three key members of the Security Council standing together it is hard to believe that Russia, China, the Arab states, Turkey, and others would not join the bandwagon. The proposal would open the way for Russia to profit from renewed commercial dealings with Iraq, a prospect that might entice Moscow into supporting, or at least not obstructing, true enforcement of the remaining restrictions on sales of military and dual-use technology. As for the Arab states, the proposal would address their central public concern—the effect of sanctions on the Iraqi people—and thus make it easier for them to support American initiatives on Iraq and other regional issues.

Revived international support for containment, in turn, would make it easier for the United States to continue its military pressure on Saddam. The Clinton administration's shift from highly publicized and controversial major air campaigns such as Desert Fox to lower-level but more constant aerial harassment has much to recommend it. No one who wears a uniform for the Iraqi regime should feel safe, and Iraqi provocations should be dealt with swiftly. Modifying the sanctions regime would not require any changes in this aspect of current U.S. policy, which unlike general economic pressure seems to have gotten under Saddam's skin and stirred up discontent among his supporters. Instead, it would provide political cover for sustained low-level strikes, buying if not international approval then at least grudging acquiescence—which in some cases, such as that of Turkey, is indispensable for the policy's continuation.

The second major benefit would be the return of international inspections and monitoring of Iraqi WMD programs. Given the recent revelations about the intelligence gathering conducted by UNSCOM staff, that organization will clearly not be permitted to return to Iraq in its current form. Not least because of guilt and embarrassment over its role in having tarnished UNSCOM's reputation, the United States should be willing to accept a change in the group's name and the replacement of some of its senior personnel as the price of renewed French and Russian backing. (In this context the announcement by UNSCOM Chairman Richard Butler of his intention to step down in June is politically opportune, although an unfortunate end to a period of noble public service.) What is important is not the name of the inspection organization or the identity of its chairman but the sincerity of its mission and the efficacy of its methods. Intrusive, on-site inspections are essential if there is to be any hope of impeding Saddam's quest for WMD.

The final benefit of lifting the sanctions would be an end to indirect U.S. complicity in the pauperization of Iraqi society, a humanitarian calamity that has long since lost whatever justification it might once have had. With cleaner hands and conscience, the U.S. government would be able to redouble its efforts to contain Saddam's military ambitions while trying to remove him from power. And a less-poor and less-ravaged population, it bears noting, would only improve the prospects for stability in Iraq in the post-Saddam era.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

PROPOSING TO lift the sanctions against Iraq in exchange for renewed inspections should appeal to both sides of the current debate over American policy toward Iraq. Those who favor containment insist, correctly, that rejuvenating the anti-Saddam coalition is essential to keeping Iraq's isolation unbroken. Relieving the suffering of ordinary Iraqis, and being seen to do so, is one of the best ways to achieve that goal. Opening up the Iraqi oil industry to foreign investment is another, and one that will particularly appeal to Russia and France, whose actions at the United Nations can ease or block American initiatives. By dropping the least effective and most unpopular component of containment, the sanctions, the United States could strengthen and

preserve the most effective components of the policy, the restraints on Iraq's dangerous conventional and unconventional military capabilities.

But the proposal should also appeal to advocates of "rollback," which involves using American military assets to support the Iraqi opposition and bring down Saddam. Few knowledgeable observers believe that rollback is feasible at the moment: the Iraqi opposition movement is weak and divided; regional states whose support would be necessary for a rollback strategy to succeed are either unreliable, unenthusiastic, or both; and the Clinton administration itself, despite occasional high-level rhetoric to the contrary, appears uncertain about both how to oust Saddam and what would happen afterward.

Exchanging sanctions for inspections should appeal to everyone.

Down the road, however, some of these conditions might change, and rollback might become a more promising alternative. Its supporters therefore need to keep Iraq in check over the short term while establishing, among Iraqis of all stripes, the benevolent credentials of the United States and those who work with it. There is no better way of doing this than proposing to lift the economic sanctions, which practically all Iraqis abhor. Even Ahmed Chalabi, the head of the Iraqi National Congress—the favorite Iraqi opposition group of the Clinton administration's domestic critics—has argued that "any policy which punishes the Iraqi people is both short-sighted and immoral. The United States needs to adopt measures which target the Iraqi regime, not the people." A clear statement that the United States is working to alleviate the sufferings of Iraq's population, even as it tries to topple the country's tyrannical ruler, would make American forces more welcome in Iraq and make cooperation with the United States easier for other regional governments to defend.

Skeptics might concede many of the arguments offered here but argue that proposing a sanctions-for-inspections deal is nevertheless impractical for three reasons: because it might be the first step down a slippery slope of appeasement; because Saddam might not accept the deal; and because he might accept it now and then cheat later. None of these objections holds up.

The first assumes that any change in the U.S. position on Iraq will lead the entire fabric of containment to unravel. Once general economic

sanctions have been lifted, this argument runs, officials will come under pressure to relax other restrictions as well, and soon Saddam will have escaped from his box and be able to threaten his neighbors and enemies once again. But there is simply no reason why dropping one cruel and ineffective aspect of containment should lead to dropping the remaining aspects, which are both less cruel and more effective. In fact, the whole point of the deal would be to strengthen containment by narrowing it. Any pressures to follow sensible revisions with irrational appeasement could and would be resisted.

The second objection takes the opposite view: Precisely because the proposal does not involve appeasement Saddam will never accept it. Although he may want sanctions to be lifted, he has never in the past been willing to trade his WMD programs in return and is unlikely to do so now. This might be true—Saddam has responded coolly even to the French version of this proposal, which involved less-stringent inspection measures—but it is not an argument against making the offer. The Iraqi leader might just decide that returning to a cat-and-mouse game with motivated inspectors presents enough of a chance of retaining his WMD programs to make acceptance—and greater incoming revenues—worthwhile. But even if the proposal were rejected, its announcement would give the United States a major leg up in the ongoing battle over world and regional public opinion. The United States would burnish its reputation for caring more about the Iraqi people than Saddam and be able to return to its previous policy with an easier conscience, all at no cost.

The third and most valid objection is based on the assumption that Saddam might be clever enough to outfox his enemies one more time. He might accept the proposed deal and pocket the lifting of sanctions, but then stop cooperating with arms inspectors several months down the road—thus taking advantage of increased revenues while avoiding real constraints on his WMD programs. Certainly some such maneuver would be on Saddam's mind if he did accept the deal; his record proves that it is a fool's game to expect Saddam to voluntarily live up to any obligations he incurs. And yet precisely because this possibility can be anticipated, it can be planned for in advance.

Since restoring general economic sanctions at that point would be both difficult and unhelpful, the U.S. response to any interruption of

the new inspection and monitoring regime should be sharp, quick retaliatory air strikes against Saddam's key military and security assets. Powerful attacks against prominent targets that symbolize and underpin his rule would convince him to allow the inspectors to do their jobs without too much outright interference—although actual Iraqi cooperation, of course, is highly unlikely. With economic sanctions lifted, moreover, the United States should find international backing for such strikes greater than before, because Saddam would clearly have violated his obligations yet again, on issues that his neighbors will find quite worrisome.

If the United States proposes the deal outlined here, Iraq can accept it or reject it. Either way, the United States gains. Even if accepted, however, the deal would not solve all or even most of the United States' problems with Iraq. As the supporters of rollback correctly point out, Saddam remains the core issue. While he rules, Iraq will continue to threaten its neighbors, American interests, and its own people. But the path charted here at least holds out the promise of slightly improving the day-to-day life of average Iraqis while recreating serious obstacles to Iraq's development of WMD. These would be worthy achievements along the road to that long-awaited day when Saddam becomes only a bitter memory.